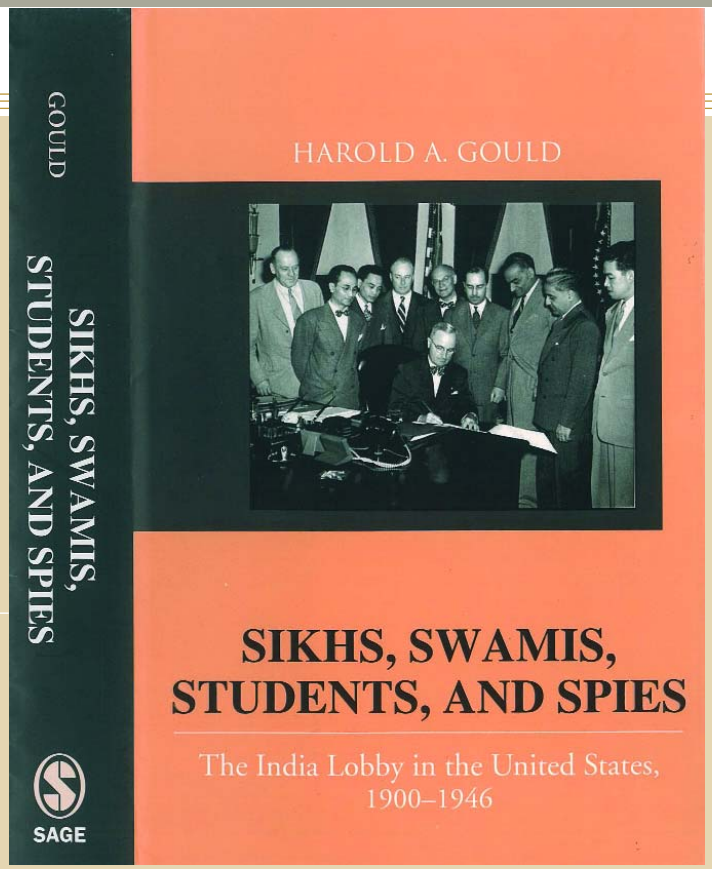
How South Asians Forged an India Lobby in Washington

By FRANCIS C. ASSISI



Harold Gould's illuminating and engaging study of Indo-U.S. relations is newsworthy in several respects. For the first time, we are given a blow-by-blow account of how the "India Lobby" succeeded in its endeavors in Washington, D.C during the 1940s. Secondly, the book goes on to identify a Department of State official, a scholar Gould calls a friend, who helped that lobbying effort by bringing their cause to the attention of the American press and public.

Finally, Gould's book places in perspective the pro-India lobbying efforts of present-day groups such as the U.S. India Political Action Committee, the India Caucus in the U.S. Congress, the Friends of India group in the Senate, and organizations such as the Indian American Forum for Political Education.

Despite their meager numbers—fewer than 5,000 in North America by 1910—South Asians had begun the process of political mobilization in America. Their goal: to secure freedom from British rule back home in India and be assured of their civil rights in America.

In her own book, historian Joan Jensen has tallied the plight of South Asians in America during that period: "Excluded from immigration, prosecuted for their political activities, threatened with deportation, excluded from citizenship, denaturalized, excluded from land ownership, and regulated even in the choice of a mate in the states where most of them lived, Indians now formed a small band of people set apart from Americans by what truly must have seemed a great white wall."

The Hope and the Reality: U.S.-Indian Relations from Roosevelt to Reagan by Harold A. Gould is available at the American Library in New Delhi, Kolkata, Chennai and Mumbai.

Sikhs, Swamis, Students, and Spies The India Lobby in the United States, 1900-1946 by **Harold A. Gould.** Hardcover, 460 pages. Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, California, 2006

Who were the key activists behind the political awakening that followed? What were the institutions they created? How did they go about mobilizing and organizing a nascent community to fight for their civil rights? And how did it lead to President Harry S Truman's signature on the Luce-Celler Bill on July 2, 1946, which ended four decades of what President Franklin D. Roosevelt had called "statutory discrimination against the Indians"? The big change the bill made for Indian immigrants in America was that it gave them the right to become U.S. citizens.

Gould, a distinguished scholar of South Asian Studies at the University of Virginia reveals how the lobbying efforts of a handful of politically savvy South Asians in America would lead to the ultimate political breakthrough persuading significant sections of the American public, a majority of the U.S. Congress, and indeed the President himself, to decisively support independence for India. Furthermore, he explains how they took the critical step in institution building by reaching out to sympathetic groups and individuals in the United States.

But apparently it was Rawalpindi-born Sardar Jagjit Singh, known as J.J., who emerged as the "maestro of the final phase of the India Lobby's trek through American history." It was he who mastered the art of fitting into the social and political mainstream. One observer has commented that J.J. "never made a nuisance of himself" yet he "covered miles in Congressional hallways." Gould says that J.J.'s immersion in the economic life and cosmopolitan lifestyle of New York, transformed him into a suave, highly Westernized Indian, an "unshorn Sikh," who mastered the art of fitting into the American social and political mainstream.

Basically, according to Gould, J.J. became a "one-man lobby" gaining control of the India League of America and making it, along with the Indian Chamber of Commerce which he founded, the focal point of a lobbying machine which took the lead in projecting the South Asian message in Washington, New York and throughout the country. Indeed, it was with great foresight that J.J. proposed that the League pay less attention to culture and philosophy and more to politics and propaganda. He also proposed that the League abandon its policy of restricting its membership to Indians and that it should go about corralling some prominent American members.

J.J.'s lobbying style in Washington was colorfully described to the author by Robert Crane, a former State Department official and scholar who knew J.J. well: "He…used to come down to D.C. two or three times a week, where he would rent a suite in one of the best hotels in town, put out a very nice bar, and then hold a press conference which was announced in advance. He would manage to get on the press wires and ticker tapes. He was so shrewd. He always brought a Congressman or a Senator with him, which naturally drew a crowd…He had a genius for PR."

J.J. believed that the American business community might be brought on board if one could connect the immigration question and political freedom for India to the post-war potential for expanded American trade with India. J.J. stressed this potentiality in a statement he gave before Congress in early 1945. "The 400 million East Indians represent a great untapped trade reservoir," he declared. "There exists over there a great demand for American goods."

According to Gould, the India Lobby gelled and reached its climax during World War II. By then Indians had learned how to work the system, had become media savvy and constructed political networks.

Gould reminds us: "By today's standards, of course, their efforts and their accomplishments would appear to be modest in the extreme. But in the context of their time, and given the limited manpower and material resources available to them, their effort was remarkable; their accomplishments impressive."

This was also a time when the India Lobby developed what Gould calls a "mole" in the State Department. One of the newsworthy highlights of Gould's book is that he has publicly identified this man—an academic colleague to whom the book is dedicated: Robert Crane.

According to Gould, a confidential memo, prepared by William Phillips, the U.S. special envoy to pre-independence India, addressed to President Franklin D. Roosevelt and highly critical of British policy towards Indian freedom, fell into the hands of Drew Pearson, a syndicated columnist of *The Washington Post*. Phillips believed that the war effort in Asia had been placed in jeopardy by what he viewed as British arrogance and intransigence. Phillips insisted that the British should, as a gesture to the nationalists, unequivocally declare their intention to grant independence to India once the war ended. Pearson's disclosure of the ambassador's comments in the *Post* caused a sensation in Washington, and proved to be a public relations windfall for the India Lobby.

Gould says that Pearson was fed the information through Crane, who died in 1997. Crane, who later became a noted historian of South Asia, was, during this period, an obscure junior officer on the India Desk in the Division of Cultural Relations in the State Department. As the child of missionary parents, he had spent his early years in Bengal.

This is a vastly important book for all South Asian Americans as well as Americans interested in the historical linkages with the subcontinent. It is their story.

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